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MISCELLANY

BORINQUÉN

Early Days of the Church in Porto Rico

Porto Rico was discovered by Columbus on his second voyage, in 1493, and conquered by the famous seeker for immortal youth, Ponce de León, in 1508. The Indian name of the island was Borinquén, and the aborigines, who soon disappeared under the Spanish system of colonization, were called by the Spaniards "Borinquenios." These terms are now used symbolically and poetically as epithets of the island and its inhabitants, being evidence of the tendency among the former American dependencies of Spain to adopt as typical of the respective countries indigenous, rather than Spanish, ideals and legends, and to glorify the original inhabitants of the land rather than the conquistadores, without, however, detracting from the honors justly due the latter.¹ So to us "Borinquén" may typify pioneer days in the beautiful island, romantically called "the land of perpetual June."

As in all the Spanish colonies, the civilizing and Christianizing ideal went hand in hand in Porto Rico. One of the glories of the Spanish colonizing period is the missionary zeal which characterized almost all the exploring and colonizing expeditions, and which has done much to wipe out the memory of the cruelties and injustice practised by the conquistadores. With each expedition went the priest, to bless and sanctify the undertaking, to say the first Mass in the new land, and often to be the protector of the helpless Indians against his harsher companions. So it is not surprising to find as early as 1493, in a Bull of Pope Alexander VI (May 4, 1493) instructions to the rulers of Spain (who were recognized as having the right of patronage in the Indies) to "send to the said mainlands and islands good, God-fearing men, learned, wise, and skilled, to instruct the natives and inhabitants in the Catholic faith and teach them good customs, applying to it all due diligence." Queen Isabel, in her famous testament, likewise urged upon her daughter Juana the fulfilment of the apostolic mandate. Under date of November 16, 1504, was issued the bull *Illius fulciti praesidio*, which established three Sees in the Indies: the Hiagustensian (metropolitan), the Bagustensian, and the Magutensian. This Bull, however, did not take effect, being repealed by the Bull of August 11, 1511, which

¹ This tendency is especially strong in Peru and Chile, where the Incas and Araucanian Indians are so glorified.

suppressed the dioceses previously created, substituting those of Santo Domingo, Concepción de la Vega, and San Juan (Porto Rico), under the See of Seville as Metropolitan.

For these three Sees were named respectively Don Francisco García de Padilla, Don Pedro Suárez Deza, and Don Alfonso Manso. Of these only the latter two were ever consecrated, Bishop Padilla dying before being consecrated, and his successor, Bishop Geraldino, not being appointed until 1516. Bishop Suárez de Deza did not reach his See until after 1516, so that Bishop Manso, who arrived at Caparra, Porto Rico, in 1513, was the first bishop of the Indies to reach his diocese, and consequently the first bishop in America. This seems borne out by contemporary evidence. (Cf. BRAU, *La Colonización de Puerto Rico*, p. 377.)

The life of this bishop is given in some detail in the episcopology which follows. It is worthy of note that he occupied the See longer than any of his successors (twenty-six years), and that much of his episcopate was passed in conflict with those tendencies which the Church had to combat almost universally during the colonizing period: excesses due to the thirst for gold, cruelty towards the natives, enslaving of the Indians, enmities and dishonorable conduct by the conquistadores towards each other. This truly epic struggle between the Christian missionary ideal and the selfish, wealth-seeking, worldly ideal, a struggle of which the saintly Bartolomé de las Casas was the great protagonist, was waged in Porto Rico as in other lands of the New World, with Bishop Manso as the apostle of right. This "great man and holy person," as González Fernández de Oviedo calls him, used all the faculties and powers he possessed to restrain the fierce, passionate, warlike conquistadores, and succeeded in destroying, or at least lessening, grave and sinful abuses, especially the practice of usury. His campaign against usury brought him into bitter conflict with persons concerned, who were powerful enough to bring complaints against him to the Council of the Indies. The passage of time finally eradicated this, as it has many another, evil.

The historic position of the Church as the patron and protector of learning and the ever-fostering promoter of education is well illustrated in Porto Rico. Hardly had conditions in the new colony settled down to a fairly orderly basis, when the bishop established the Hospital of San Ildefonso, the first in the island, and a Grammar School (Escuela de Gramática). This school was, of course, a "grammar school" in the ancient sense, a cathedral school on the order of those conducted throughout the Middle Ages, and whose historic place in England has only recently been prop-

erly recognized.² The curriculum included the humanities, philosophy, and elementary theology. In spite of the lack of priests, the sparseness of the population, the uncertain communications, and the general poverty and insecurity of the island, the school lived and flourished, so that under the episcopate of Bishop Manso's successor we find four of its graduates, natives of the island, receiving Holy Orders, having apparently completed all their studies within the colony. These young men, Gonzalo Domingo, Francisco Díaz de Lepe, Sebastián Sanabria, and Francisco de Liende, were ordained probably in 1548. Under later episcopates many other young men educated in Porto Rico took up the Master's work, and in a sense this school may be said to be the embryo of the present seminary, now happily re-established under the enlightened and progressive administration of the present bishop, Right Reverend William A. Jones, O. S. A. Throughout the history of the diocese constant appeals are made by the bishops to the pastors of the island to teach "not only Christian Doctrine, but also the letters of the alphabet (reading) and writing." In the work of educating the people the Dominicans for many years played a leading rôle.

This brief sketch could not fittingly conclude without a reference to the antiquity of this diocese, now for twenty years under the American flag. When one realizes that its foundation antedated by approximately 100 years the first settlement of the English in America, and that it has actually celebrated its Fourth Centennial (any sort of centennial being of considerable rarity in the Americas), some conception is gained of the historic interest it affords. Nor is the interest wholly historical; its life is the life of the Church in miniature—the struggle with poverty, and evil, and indifference, the years of faithful toil and abnegation, and the ultimate success which must crown the efforts of its present wise government.

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² Cf. LEACH, *The Schools of Medieval England*. New York, 1915.